

# Effects of Peer Mentorship on Student Leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

Orienting and welcoming first-year students to campus and to honors programs are often key components of program development. At an institutional level, successful orientation programs can positively affect retention rates from the first to second year. The greater a student's involvement and integration into the life of the university, the less likely the student is to leave (Tinto). Institutional retention often translates into retention within honors programs as well. The most important benefit of orientation, however, is that students feel welcomed at the university and within the honors program. Not only do they understand the requirements of the program, but they also make friends and begin to envision how they might use their honors program experience to grow as scholars and citizens while also having a bit of fun in the process. In an attempt to achieve all of these goals, the honors program at Minnesota State University, Mankato established a first-year honors student retreat incorporating peer mentors.

During summer orientation, new students meet with an honors staff member to discuss courses and the program's curriculum. Students then enroll in an introductory course that facilitates personal reflection and exploration in the three competency areas of leadership, research, and global citizenship. Feedback from this introductory course consistently indicated that students wanted to learn about the program curriculum and their competency development in a way that was more interactive with older students and that got them outside of the physical classroom. In response to this feedback, honors program staff began to learn about first-year retreat programs at other universities and brainstorm ideas about what might work best for students at MSU, Mankato.

In the fall of 2014, the staff worked together to create the first honors student retreat. The program already had an established group of peer mentors whom we decided to empower as leaders of the retreat. Staff and mentors decided to schedule the retreat early in the academic year so that students could become involved with the program outside of the classroom relatively quickly. Early involvement is crucial because failure to participate in campus activities, organizations, and extracurricular activities, which promote integration into college life, can lead to higher chances of attrition for some students (Roberts & McNeese). With more input from student leaders and a more formalized process in the fall of 2015, students and staff have created a sustainable program that allows first-year students to learn and have fun while at the same time it promotes leadership skills and provides mentorship opportunities for older students.

The rationale behind the first-year student retreat, the procedures for organizing and facilitating it, and its impact on both first-year students and mentors might inspire other honors programs to implement high-impact practices that facilitate successful student transition into college.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

All honors programs are comprehensive umbrellas under which many high-impact educational practices take place. Many such practices that were highlighted by Kuh in 2008 can be found within the MSU, Mankato Honors Program: learning communities; undergraduate research; diversity and global learning; and capstone courses and projects. The retreat adds a high-impact practice for first-year students. Leichter has argued that "providing intentional, rigorous, and intellectually challenging educational opportunities for students to develop leadership skills is arguably a core mission of

honors programs and colleges” (155), and the retreat has helped fulfill our honors program’s mission by providing an outlet for older students to challenge themselves in a peer mentor role.

The honors student retreat is both a first-year experience and a common intellectual experience. What makes it exciting is its combination of intellectual pursuits, through the enhancement of students’ knowledge and understanding of the three competencies, with a social component that engages mentors throughout the creation and execution of the event and beyond as friends of first-year students. Many of the mentors are trained through a seminar, *Developing Your Mentor Philosophy*, and the retreat allows them to apply their knowledge in a practical situation.

## **PROGRAM NARRATIVE**

One focus of the MSU, Mankato Honors Program’s current strategic plan (2013–2016) is learner success. Four out of the seven success indicators of this focus center on the development and achievement of competency benchmarks at key areas of students’ academic careers. Therefore, students need to understand the competencies early on in their academic career and begin to consider ways they might apply them to their discipline and other interests. The first-year student retreat helps students achieve this understanding through experiential learning and interaction with mentors.

Another focus of the strategic plan is the honors student experience. Two key success indicators are that 80% of honors students will be retained in the program into their second year and that 80% of honors students will find value in honors-sponsored co-curricular experiences. A key goal of the first-year student retreat is to help students establish a sense of belonging in the honors program and thus to remain in the program for their second year and ideally through graduation. Fifteen of the seventeen students who attended the 2014 retreat are still in the program.

Our strategic plan also focuses on access and program growth. Two university retention success indicators are described in this focus: 95% of honors program first-year students will be retained to the sophomore year, and honors student retention rates at the university will exceed their peer group, based on class rank and ACT scores. Even if students choose to leave the honors program, we hope that the first-year retreat eases their transition into college so that they find a niche at the university, motivating them to remain after their first year.

Sophomores also need opportunities to grow as leaders and mentors. Research has shown that mentors are often highly committed to their organizations, less likely to leave, and more likely to go on to provide leadership talent within that organization (Burke et al.). Beyond the institution, “innovators in industry, education, and the non-profit sector all search for individuals with leadership skills, and developing such skills is vital to students’ undergraduate experience” (Leichliter 156). The first-year retreat further provides honors mentors with career and life skills as they take on the role of prime leaders for this experience.

In 2014, we contacted students who had completed *Developing Your Mentor Philosophy* about the opportunity to help create a retreat, and a total of six students responded. These students chose various roles to help teach first-year students about one of the program’s competencies: leadership, research, or global citizenship. Then in 2015, the program’s graduate assistant introduced a formal application process to recruit upperclassmen as student volunteers. Application questions elicited information about qualities and skills the student possessed; experience in leadership, research, and global citizenship; the student’s experience with the transition from high school to higher education; any group facilitation practice; and a personal or professional reference. We encouraged any student who had completed *Developing Your Mentor Philosophy* or helped with the retreat the previous year to apply. After a week, we had a total of fourteen applicants. We accepted all applicants and assigned specific roles based on application answers. Six of the students became facilitators. Their role was to develop activities related to leadership, research, and global citizenship. Two other students were named retreat coordinators, who were responsible for overseeing the facilitators. The remaining six students assumed the role of student coordinators. All mentors worked as a team to increase the level of student participation, thus making the retreat almost entirely student-planned.

## MENTOR IMPACT

The mentors decided that their purpose was to inform first-year students about honors competencies, facilitate open discussion on how to approach these during academic careers, and develop their own leadership skills through activity facilitation. “Peer leadership programs . . . give upper-class students the opportunity to serve as leaders by assisting with extra curricular activities, course teaching, tutoring, and other pursuits” (Leichliter 156). Fulfilling this leadership role, the mentors decided that activities should focus

on the honors competencies of leadership, research, and global citizenship. They also wanted to incorporate activities that focused on information helpful to new students. Staff and students planned a full day of activities that included sessions about program requirements, fitting honors into various majors, understanding the concept of reflection, and finding faculty research mentors. After meeting monthly starting in January, planning sessions for the retreat concluded at the end of spring semester with an itinerary outline, a request for materials, and a list of confirmed faculty and student volunteers. When the 2014–2015 academic year began, student leaders practiced facilitation with their partners. During their introductory honors courses, first-year students signed up to attend so that leaders could cater the activities to a definite number of participants. The retreat was not mandatory for first-year students although staff highly recommended it.

In January 2015, the planning process was similar except for the level of program faculty and staff involvement. The student retreat coordinators took a larger leadership role in the planning and execution of activities, thus glean- ing the benefits of student involvement in leadership programs that, according to Komives et al., include learning from peers as well as gaining and practicing valuable leadership skills. The assistant director and graduate assistant called the initial planning meeting to review the goals established the previous year and to introduce the leadership team to their peers. After this meeting, the only staff involvement was the graduate assistant's establishment of meeting times. The leadership team decided to keep the breakout sessions related to the three competencies; the main changes were a shortening of the itinerary, the introduction of a session about getting involved with honors, and the exclusive use of student facilitators (Appendix A & Appendix B).

### **Short-term Effects of Participating in the Retreat**

Student leaders practiced group facilitation and mentoring techniques, provided an event for first-year students to interact with the mentors, and advised their peers in honors competencies and language.

The most immediate payout for student leaders was that they practiced event planning and coordination. The leaders hosted frequent formal meetings during the semester before the retreat, reviewing the previous agendas and proposing changes and additions to programming. The leaders were creative in their design of engaging activities given the resources available. In reflecting on their past experiences, they could create better activities by filling gaps and taking ownership of projects. Coordinating with other student

leaders on a team allowed the leaders to practice active listening skills. Clear communication of ideas was key, and accepting criticism added to their interpersonal skills.

Student leaders who were enrolled in Developing Your Mentor Philosophy benefitted in ways beyond event planning and coordination; by providing an event for first-year students to interact with the mentors, the leaders promoted the progress of the mentorship program, developing their abilities to be resourceful while practicing interpersonal communication skills. They practiced their personal philosophies of mentorship by demonstrating their abilities to advise peers in honors competencies and language. As the primary facilitators of the retreat, the mentors led activities and games centered on students' learning needs. They practiced group development skills and encouraged sharing of diverse perspectives.

### **Long-term Effects of Participating in the Retreat**

Ideally, students who serve as leaders reflect on their mentoring experience in their electronic portfolios. While research indicates that extracurricular and social involvement have a net positive impact on student self-reports of their career-related skills (Pascarella & Terenzini), we do not have enough data to support this claim since most of the mentors have not reached the stage at which they defend their portfolios. However, mentors have had the opportunity to reflect on their experience in other outlets. For example, two mentors who previously participated in the retreat as first-year students wrote an article for *The Honors Beacon*, the program's biannual newsletter, in which they described organizing the event, forming relationships with first-year students, and developing their own leadership philosophies (Anderson & Cummings). As student mentors identify and reflect on positive aspects of their leadership development and consider how to take that development into their future careers, we hope that they will include this experience in their reflections.

If students have the opportunity to serve as leaders again or take on a coordinator position, we also hope that they will take the opportunity to build on their first experience as a leader, taking on other leadership roles within our program, i.e., on the Honors Student Council Board, or outside the program in other campus organizations. Through extended involvement, students can continue to build their leadership and mentorship philosophies. Given the infancy of the retreat, we do not have enough data yet to determine whether it has led directly to skills and personal philosophies of leadership, but research on other campuses suggests such a direct connection (Komives et al.).

## FIRST-YEAR STUDENT IMPACT

The primary focus and purpose of the retreat is to inform and engage with first-year honors students on a social and academic level. While participating in the retreat, they develop a social connection in the program to mentors and first-year peers, thus helping them successfully transition to college. While students must experience academic success to remain in college, becoming involved and engaged in other areas of college is also vital (Roberts & McNeese).

We hope that the retreat helps to develop a concrete understanding of abstract ideas, specifically the honors competencies of leadership, research, and global citizenship. Based on student artifacts from our course First-Year Experience in fall 2015, we believe that the retreat activities are integral to students' understanding of the competencies. When asked to reflect on key experiences from their first semester, many students cited the retreat as a key piece of their development. Some students stated that the retreat provided more knowledge or context for all three competencies and the honors program in general. One student stated, "This event has helped me to have a better understanding on what leadership, global citizenship, and research mean in the context of the Honors Program. Prior to the event, I had a vague understanding of what the three meant, but now I have a better, but not complete, grasp on them." Another said, "From this experience I was able to better visualize what the expectations of me as an Honors student are and how I can complete the Honors Program." Other students found the event to be primarily beneficial for one competency area. For example, one student articulated a new perspective on the concept of research: "The first and most important thing I learned during this event was about research, the competency I knew the least about. It lessened my worries about how hefty the word 'research' is. I now understand that research can be an experiment, a survey, or simply an observation." Other students identified social benefits from the retreat as well. One student said, "It was a good event to lay the foundation of what the program is about in a fun and engaging way. I made good connections with other Honors students I had not met yet." Whether students found the primary benefit to be comprehension of the overarching expectations of honors students, specific or general competency development, or development of a social community, all who chose to reflect on the experience agreed that the retreat was a valuable extracurricular experience.



## DISCUSSION

As the program grows and the retreat becomes a staple of our honors program, student needs should be considered. Although the mentors have a drive to develop their leadership skills, they need to learn the necessary information and get experience practicing. The student leaders need a formal training process to ensure proper guidance and mentorship. Training sessions would need to be paired with planning sessions in order to reduce the demand on the mentors' schedules since many of them are highly involved. The mentors' basic training would need to include knowledge about other campus resources for first-year support services, diversity training, and facilitation techniques. Student leaders are close in age to the first-year participants and, as Cuseo has argued, allow conversations to be more honest and make peers more approachable than faculty or staff positions. Still, proper training in how to mediate and debrief activities so that each participant has an equal voice provides for healthier discussions in a safe environment. Since strong presentation and interpersonal communication skills are also needed to facilitate diverse populations (Ganser & Kennedy), the mentors also need to hone these skills, which are applicable to future leadership in teams and groups.

Our student leaders gained first-hand knowledge about time management while facilitating the retreat and came to realize that length of activities plays a big role in participation. Time was a factor in the planning between our first retreat and the second. The students felt the day was too long, and the breaks led to disengagement. Shortening the retreat to a half day greatly reduced the financial strain on the program as the need for materials and food was cut in half. As the program grows and the number of participants increases, the need for longer debriefing and discussion periods will probably increase. The leaders will need to manage this time wisely and implement creative solutions such as smaller group sizes and interactive reflection initiatives.

We are encouraged to continue the first-year student retreat based on qualitative and quantitative data that show its success (Appendix C & Appendix D). On survey evaluations, students have consistently indicated on a Likert scale that the retreat helps them understand the three competencies and learn ways to advance their development. Students have stated that they are more aware of what they're "going to be doing in honors," of "how to start research" and "how to fulfill competencies." They have also stated that the most significant piece of information included the idea that "everyone has



leadership skills” and that they don’t need to “feel overwhelmed with everything.” One student stated that the honors program is “more than just school.” A particularly gratifying piece of feedback was that a first-year student “loved being with the mentor of my major.” These reactions are all outcomes that we hope for from the retreat. Furthermore, we hope that many students who attend the retreat as first-year students choose to be mentors and student retreat coordinators in future years. Dewart et al. have stated that, once students have gained academic information about increased student learning and have found benefits from participating as mentees, their willingness to participate in the program as mentors increases, thus providing a self-perpetuating model. Of the first-year students who participated in 2014, eight participants went on to provide facilitation and/or served a leadership role during the 2015 retreat. Our program looks to expand the roles of the retreat leaders; as outlined in Johnson, peer mentors serving as teaching assistants can provide beginning students with first-hand accounts of honors involvement. We are actively working on developing such teaching assistantships for the 2016–2017 academic year.

Based on our experience at MSU, Mankato, we believe that honors programs benefit from high-impact practices that facilitate short- and long-term growth and development within their students. First-year students need a successful transition to the university and their honors program for the sake of the program’s development as well as the students’. With universities examining retention as an indicator of progress and success, honors programs can use a first-year retreat to facilitate student transition. We believe that our model serves as a successful example, and we hope that it inspires other programs to create similar practices.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Honors Student Retreat Itinerary Saturday, September 12th 2015**

- 1:00 pm Welcome to Honors Student Orientation
- 1:15 pm Icebreaker Activities
- 1:45 pm Breakout Session One (Nametag Groups)
- 2:20 pm Information Session One: “How to get involved in Honors”
- 2:55 pm Breakout Session Two (Nametag Groups)
- 3:30 pm Information Session Two: “Honors and your Major”
- 4:00 pm Information Session Three: “Reflection”
- 4:35 pm Breakout Session Three (Nametag Groups)
- 5:30 pm Skits
- 5:45 pm Fear in a Hat
- 6:00 pm End Notes and Optional Survey for Prize
- 6:00 pm Dinner: All Honors Cookout

## APPENDIX B

### Global Citizenship Activity—Barnga

#### *Equipment*

- 3–4 sets of playing cards
- List of rules printed out for playing Barnga (each slightly different)
- Tournament rules

#### *Setup*

Label tables 1, 2, 3, etc. For ‘Five Tricks’: Divide the group into teams of three or four (depending on group size): need at least 3 teams. Each group will get a deck of 28 cards (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and Ace in each suit). Groups will sit at a labeled table. Pass out basic rules for ‘Five Tricks’ to each group. (Do not let them know that each have a slightly different set of rules! Example: Ace is high in one group and ace is low in another.)

#### *Procedure*

1. Allow students about 5 minutes to play and practice ‘Five Tricks’ (Rules attached)
2. After 5 minutes take up the rules and enforce a strict no verbal/language communication policy. No writing or using sign language
3. Will have another minute or two to play at home table in silence. (Facilitators need to uphold this policy)
4. Tournament rules:
  - a. Reinforce that there is no speaking!
  - b. Scoring begins at the start of the tournament
  - c. 5 games will be played. This makes up a round. Each round lasts a few minutes (based on overall group finishing times)
    - i. Game winner: Player that wins the most tricks in one hand
    - ii. Round winner: Player that wins the most games in a round (5 games)
    - iii. If game not finished by end of round then the player who has won the most games at that time wins the round

- d. Moving tables in the tournament
  - i. The player who has won the round will move up to the next highest table number
  - ii. The player who has lost the round will move down to the next lowest table number
  - iii. Winning players at the highest table will remain, and vice versa for the lowest tables
  - iv. Players who do not win or lose will remain at current table
  - v. Ties will be resolved by rock, paper, scissors

### *For the Facilitator*

Will notice that participants will be getting confused and some frustrated. Most of the rules are the same, but only slightly different in one way. Some will understand that the rules are different but not sure exactly how. And even if there is understanding, bridging the gap of communication can be difficult. Will be a spark for discussion after game is finished and how applies to real life situations.

*Debriefing Topics*—Can use any form of reflection (Q&A, skits, art, metaphors, etc)

- What happened during the game/tournament? What emotions did it provoke?
- What were some of the ways you tried to communicate? What worked? What did not?
- Did you try to compromise? What approach did you take to find the best solution?
- What thoughts went through your mind when you realized someone was different than you? Or when you realized you were different from the group?
- What does the game suggest about what to do when you are in a similar situation in the real world?
- How does this game focus our attention on the hidden aspects of culture?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Fall Retreat Survey**

1. Name
2. On a scale of 1–5 how well do you feel this event built your honors community?
3. On a scale of 1–5 rank your understanding of the three competencies
  - a. Research
  - b. Leadership
  - c. Global Citizenship
4. How many new people did you meet?
5. What is the most significant piece of information you learned today?
6. What would you like to hear more about the Honors Program that you didn't learn about today?

# APPENDIX D

## 2015 STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Community	Research	Leadership	Global Citizen	New People	Most Significant Piece of Information	Like to Hear More About?
5	4	5	4	Many	Information on research	Volunteer on/off campus
5	3	5	3	Everybody	Everyone has leadership skills	Nothing
4	4	4	4	10	Competency specifics and how other students manage	All are answered for the moment
5	3	3	3	At least 6	To not feel overwhelmed with everything	How to build our e-portfolio
4	4	5	4	About 35–30	A lot about global citizenship	More about research
4	3	5	4	6	Research	Connect major to research
4	3	5	4	5	Examples of research	Study abroad and research
5	4	5	5	A lot	Differences on three competencies	More student projects on research
5	4	5	5	Everyone there	Get involved	Nothing
4	3	5	4	Lots	How important communication is	Reflections
5	4	5	4	100	There are four years to complete everything	What is our role at MNSU?
4	2	3	4	24	Research doesn't have to be done right away	Get involved with honors?
5	4	5	4	10	It's more than just school	Language requirements



4	4	4	5	3	Lots	Loved being with the mentor of my major	All are answered!
3	4	4	4	4	A bunch	Different things needed for the program	Opportunities in honors
4	3	5	5	3	23	Research project	The research project
4	4	4	4	3	A bunch	Better understanding of the competencies	Honors groups for leadership?
3	4	5	5	5	3 to 5	Research is very doable	Honors graduation distinctions?

## 2014 STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Community	Research	Leadership	Global Citizen	New People	Most Significant Piece of Information	Like to Hear More About?
4	2	3	4	10	Who to ask for help	What to do now to affect competencies
4.5	3.5	5	5	7	Requirements for competencies	Nothing
4	4	4	4	10	When to research. Fills each competency	Language qualification
4	5	4	4	A lot	How to do research	More on global citizenship
4	3	4	4	A lot	Everything is flexible and people are cool	Other honors activities
4.5	4	5	5	15	Don't have to retake gen. ed. courses	Summary of e-folio
5	n/a	5	4	10 plus	Short/Long-term benefits. Worth the work	Managing with athletics
5	3	5	5	20 plus	Being patient and asking questions	Nothing. Really happy I came!
4	5	4	3	7 to 8	Research competency	Nothing
4	4	4	4	15 plus	4 years to fit everything in	Global citizenship experiences
4	5	3	5	5 plus	Research can be done abroad	Leadership competency
4	3	4	4	5	How to start research	Studying abroad opportunities w/honors
4	4	4	3	A lot	A lot about research	More on global citizenship

4	3	4	4	4	6	Don't need class for language competency	Nothing
3	4	4	4	4	10	More information on my foreign language	Nothing
4	4	4	4	4	20	How to fulfill competencies	How to start e-folio
4	5	4	4	4	10	How to fulfill competencies	E-folio